



# Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 20

Issue 1 *The 2015 International Conference on Religion  
and Film in Istanbul*

Article 11

1-4-2016

## Films, Values, Absolutes: Why Theological Readings of Films are Morally and Politically Essential

Clive Marsh

*University of Leicester*, [cm286@le.ac.uk](mailto:cm286@le.ac.uk)

### Recommended Citation

Marsh, Clive (2016) "Films, Values, Absolutes: Why Theological Readings of Films are Morally and Politically Essential," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss1/11>

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# Films, Values, Absolutes: Why Theological Readings of Films are Morally and Politically Essential

## **Abstract**

This article was delivered as a paper at the 2015 International Conference on Religion and Film in Istanbul, Turkey.

## Introduction: Film-Watching as Significant Social Practice

My purpose in this paper is simple: to argue for the importance of viewers' responses to the practice of film-watching as a context in which they *discover or construct* meanings by which they live their lives. I also wish to claim that such meaning-making activity has to be seen as 'theological' because of the way it actually functions. To fail to recognise this will prove socially, ethically and politically dangerous. The viewing environment – be that at the cinema, in a domestic setting watching TV, or in the many other contexts in which viewing may occur (films shown on portable devices, for example) – is not especially significant here. Though I have argued in the past that cinema-going is a religion-like practice (Marsh, 2004), my argument here does not require this. Wherever they are watched, films bring things out of people and viewers do things *with* films. Nor shall I argue that film-watching is especially important over other forms of artistic participation or appreciation (opera, classical music), consumption of popular culture (video games, popular music) or social practices such as sport. All of these may function equally, or even more so, than film-watching, as contexts of meaning-making. I contend simply that film-watching features amongst these practices, and functions significantly for viewers.

Such an argument seems to me especially important to make when, as is claimed so often across Western cultures, we live in secular and post-modern times. Whilst true in so many respects, what it means to be 'secular' and 'post-modern' requires some unpacking. Where this does not occur, and where the importance of the explicit presence of religion in Western culture is neglected or underplayed, or where postmodernism's tendency to promote indifferentism or unbridled relativism is overlooked, then the means by which Western citizens clarify the beliefs and values by which they live runs the risk of being obscured. Not only is the process obscured, the relative merits of different, sometimes competing values are not exposed and subjected to

public critique. They remain hidden, or privatized. The disclosure of values, however, may then not occur in a way that is vital for a healthy society. Citizens may operate according to hidden absolutes, be they religious or not, without being aware of the fact, or of the scale of those absolutes' significance, and without ever critically examining the myths (Midgley, 2004), metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) or stories (McAdams, 1993 and 2006) that they 'live by.'

Hence the primary concern of this paper: given that films are *one* way in which people have opportunity to have *disclosed to them* their own absolutes, to *reinforce* the beliefs and values by which they live (whether initially aware of this or not), or to *encounter other value-systems or worldviews*, how does this all work? Why is it so significant? And what is to be done with the fact that it occurs?

In offering my paper I am, of course, standing at some considerable distance from a concern with 'religious films'. I am even putting the practice of film-watching within a very broad frame of reference. I am certainly not necessarily talking of films *about* religion at all. Nor shall I seek to show how other films, whilst not tackling a religious theme, *really are* 'about' religion, or prove to be 'religious' in the way they work. That may or may not be true. My argument does not depend on such an approach. My intent is simply *to gain respect for how practices of consumption and use of the arts and of products of popular culture, including the way that films are watched, should be considered a theological practice*. This contention is based on the recognition that social practices extract from people indications of the absolutes by which they live. Whatever values and absolutes become apparent, it is then of huge cultural (and moral and political) interest to ask *what it is* that is disclosed to and from people (just what *do* people deem of crucial importance?), and *where* discussion of such disclosures will occur in society.

Margaret Miles' explorations of religious uses of film, whilst appreciative of the way society reflected itself to itself, proved quite critical of the potential of film to be wholly positive (Miles, 1997). My conclusions come close to Miles in many ways, and yet I am closer to those in cultural studies who resist the kind of value-judgment about films which divide 'art' films from 'popular' movies in accepting at the outset that it cannot be predicted which films may or may not be useful for meaning-making. I accept that societies and cultures do have to engage in public debate about what it is *worth* spending time on (watching, reading, listening to, playing). As I shall show shortly, canons of all kinds remain important, not only for the explicitly religious. Though not agreeing in all respects with British moral philosopher Roger Scruton, I do agree that 'culture counts' and it is vital to clarify what we are to do with the arts we engage with and the culture we consume, and to go on debating why some arts and culture may prove more important than others (Scruton, 2007). But canons – and in the case of films this will mean speaking of the 'greatest films of all time', for example – may actually exert little influence on what cinema-goers actually watch, are deeply influenced by, or choose to make use of.

### **The Persistence of Absolutes**

To illustrate the point that absolutes keep on appearing and have to be reckoned with even in so-called postmodern times (and not only when articulated by the conservatively religious), I begin with a telling recent example of the disclosure of an absolute not from the world of film, but from journalism. Following the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris earlier this year a cartoon appeared in the *Independent on Sunday* newspaper in Britain for 11th January 2015. It showed a heavily armed terrorist about to shoot, and a threatened cartoonist asking 'Wait! What would **He** say?' meaning that God might have an opinion too. A speech bubble appears from the top

of the page, the voice of God coming from ‘above’. God is portrayed as saying ‘Je suis Charlie’. My point in mentioning this example is not to consider the merits of arguments about whose side God might be on, but rather to note the intriguing irony that a secular British newspaper, in its support of secular free-thinking French journalists who argued very strongly for total freedom of speech, whilst seeking to be humorous with the religious reference, should even make use of such an overt religious reference *at all*. The response had to be so stark in its support of total freedom of expression, that the only obvious way to make an appeal to an absolute was via a theistic reference.

The cartoon is meant, of course, to continue the humour and the disparaging of religion, even in the face of terror, whilst assuming that it is obvious that freedom of expression trumps terrorism. Yet the irony is profound: religion distorted into terrorism requires a counter-absolute to challenge it, and, even in the midst of humour, a religious (explicitly theistic) reference is needed. Absolutes are thus still needed even in post-modern times, and public exposure and discussion of potentially competing absolutes are also necessary. But religion inevitably remains in the mix, and perhaps not always and only in ways that may be first supposed (even by secular atheists). In late- or post-modern times, however, it has become difficult to speak of absolutes at all, precisely because we know where they *can* lead (especially when linked to religion). Yet absolutes are still inevitably part even of secular, pluralist (and, for many, relativist) culture, hard though they sometimes are to own up to, and hard though they certainly are to work with.

In my opening sentence I referred to the *discovery* or *construction* of meanings. In postmodern times the extent to which people are held to be able to *construct* identities and meanings, as opposed to ‘finding out’ and disclosing what meanings *already exist* in the world, or who they already are as people, is marked. Postmodern is also classifiable as a late form of modernism in so far as human autonomy is accentuated to such an extent that there are no

meanings to be *found*. Though such individualism was scarcely the intention of the Western Enlightenment's turn to the subject and the temporary triumph of reason, it has been a result. If the turn to the subject has also led to the welcome recognition, as Romanticism had already seen, that individual subjects are most certainly also deeply emotional beings too, it has not quite coped with the full implications of this. In what follows, I am in effect using film-reception as an example of a practice in and through which human experience in all its richness (cognitive and affective) is enjoyed and made use of in the task of the discovery and/or construction of meaning and identity.

### **Using the Producer-Receiver Continuum**

What, then, does this all mean for current film-watchers, a sub-set of contemporary subjects for whom the degree of individualism which they may be expected to exercise may simply be too much to bear anyway? To address this question it is necessary to remind ourselves of what I have recently, in my teaching of religion and culture, begun to call the 'Producer-Receiver Continuum'. Theological reflection on film, examination of religion in film, or scrutiny of the religious uses to which film is put are often criticized for being too tied to literary models of interpretation ('Author-Text-Reader' models), or for not branching out into more interdisciplinary ways of 'reading film' (Nolan, 2003, Wright, 2007, Brant, 2012: 21-4, Nolan, 2009). There is accuracy in this criticism and I acknowledge that, initially approaching film from a literature background myself, I was prone to do this in my own early work (Marsh and Ortiz, 1997, Wollaston, 1998). It is hard for literary scholars fully to attend to film *as film*, with all the different hermeneutical strategies which are needed to respect how film 'works'. That said, there remains a basic pattern evident in any act of cultural interpretation: i) a product/work of art exists (a 'text' in the widest sense of that term); ii) that text is produced by someone, or

some group of people (in the case of films, not just a director, but a whole team of agents), who may have a clear intent and purpose but may accept from the start they do not control ‘the’ meaning of their text (some directors are more insistent about their product than others); and finally, iii) there is the reader, the hearer, the viewer, the receiver, a person who can never be deemed to be wholly passive, but who may choose to be more active in the interpretative than a particular medium may require, or may simply ‘let the product do its work’, even if a viewer’s interests and experience, as well as emotional and cognitive faculties, will always come into play as they respond. Even when expanded further - e.g., with an ‘Implied Author’ or ‘Implied Reader’ being added to a literary version of the Continuum, or a ‘Performance’ element being added to a musical version – this ‘Producer-Receiver Continuum’ remains in place (Ward, 2008). Even, indeed, when expanded with the addition of the components of ‘identity’ and ‘regulation’ in a more social-scientific version (as in the ‘Circuit of Culture’: Johnson, 1986, Hall, 2013) the same elements are found. There is no escaping them. There is a basic structure of a ‘text’, something or someone ‘behind’ a text, and then a recipient ‘in front of’ a text. These three elements are unavoidable.

But where is the emphasis to lie? Is a hermeneutics of meaning a matter of pure choice? Favour auteur theory, and what the director intended matters most. Truth – if it can be got at – will be what the director, not the receiver, believes to be the case. Follow screen theory, and it is how the on-screen result ‘works’ on the viewer, whether or not the viewer is aware of how it is working, and regardless of a director’s intent. Focus on the audience (as a collective or in terms of the responses of individual viewers), and it is what *we* conclude that matters.

A viewer might, of course, still respect auteur theory as a primary way of viewing film, and yet disagree with what a director wants to ‘say’ or do with their film. This is surely happening all the time as people watch films and TV, read books, or listen to music. We do not watch, read or listen to only what we agree with, for we may, indeed, not even know whether



we are going to agree before we start. *That is one of the main points of art and culture: even if we may seek entertainment first, such pastimes enable us to discern what our own views are, and to develop in self-understanding.* ‘Truth’ may not immediately dissolve into multiple irreconcilable truths, but it is not going to be easily discernible in the midst of any hermeneutical exercise. A post-modern climate does, though, shift the balance to the individual receiver as the one who has most power. In the midst of this interaction with respect to film-reception we may not, in any case, know, or even be able to find out (or even have any inclination to know) what a director intended. We may say that we simply receive the film ‘as it is’ and see how it works on us. This being so, although we may think we have a high view of a director’s intention, we may in practice not carry through this as a hermeneutical theory of how the Producer-Receiver Continuum operates.

My contention, then, is this: *regardless of how ordinary film-goers may theorize their meaning-making strategies with respect to the Producer-Receiver continuum* (and I doubt that the majority do), *it is vital to pay most attention to the importance of what occurs between a film and the viewer, at the point of, and as a consequence of, film-watching.* This is because this social practice is one way in which values, beliefs, and absolutes are being confirmed, discovered, ‘worked through’, disclosed and, potentially at least, made public.

### **Of the Making of Many Canons**

But does it not depend on what people are watching? Surely there is not the same theological value to be attached to working through the *Police Academy* franchise as there is to the kind of films which are usually considered in religion/theology and film discussion (*The Seventh Seal*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Babette’s Feast*, *21 Grams*) or newer films which clamour to be added to the list (*Cinderella Man*, *PK*, *My Name is Khan*, *Wrong Rosary*)? In one sense clearly

not; but that is to attach too much significance to the content of the film alone, or to the director's intent and the filmic content, rather than to analysis of what happens between the film and the viewer when understood within the viewer's whole viewing context. In a broader perspective other factors come into play. Why is the viewer watching *this* film, in *this* context (whatever the film be)? Where else do they undertake similar or other social practices (e.g., theatre, or at home in front of a TV)? Do they have more directly value-pursuing, or meaning-making practices than via their film-watching habits (membership of a political group, religious affiliation)? Is film the escapism that its critics believe it too often to be? *The Shawshank Redemption* was not a box office success, cannot be regarded critically as a 'great film' on strictly film-critical or aesthetic grounds, and yet viewers have made it the top film on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Viewer response to it, and use of it, has made it not just a popular film, but an informative and transformatory resource for many of its viewers (Kermode 2003).

One need not, of course, be so critical of film as a medium, or film-watching as a practice, to acknowledge that some films might have considerable cultural value whether or not a large number of viewers recognises this. Some films can, though, be deemed more significant as repositories of meaning or stimuli to meaning-making than others, even if the rules about which will 'always' work, and which will not, cannot easily be predicted. *Of Gods and Men* may not appeal to as wide a box office audience as *Seven Pounds*, but may provoke greater depth of reflection. At this point issues of canonicity emerge. What is going to last? What is it worth returning to? Which films (or books, or plays, or pieces of music) are going consistently to move, inform, and shape creatively the people who watch (and read and listen to) them? These are the 'texts' which constitute the canons containing works deemed to be culturally the most significant and fruitful for the growth of civilized society. In Roger Scruton's words: 'Every culture is characterized by a central stream or tradition of works that

have not merely “stood the test of time” but which continue to serve as models and inspirations for living practitioners’ (Scruton, 2007: 4). But it is a battle to determine what should be ‘in’ any of the canons (literary, musical, film). And ‘this battle over the canon is itself part of the canon’ (ibid.). With respect to film, there is a sense in which we as a scholarly community, alongside the film critics who may not be engaged at all in a *theological* (or even explicitly philosophical) task and those monitoring discussion about film from a religious perspective, are all collectively engaged in discussions about what should constitute a ‘filmic canon’ (bearing in mind that many different criteria are operative as the discussions continue – aesthetic, ethical, philosophical).

But whilst I accept the value of the concept of the canon (shifting though the content of various canons are) and recognise both the importance of the concept and the results of the discussion, the fact remains that *it is not only canonical works which carry, or produce, philosophical or theological meaning*. Laudable though it may be to contribute to the discussion of what is, and should be, in any cultural canon – including one of film – this has relatively little bearing on the question of what people do *actually* watch (or read, or listen to) and what people then *do* with what they watch (or listen to, or read). We have clearly moved into the territory of cultural studies here. But as a theologian eavesdropping on the explorations of cultural studies scholars, I find it dismaying at how little religion features explicitly within the discipline. (Religion is usually simply subsumed within the totality of cultural experience.) Explicit religious practice is clearly part of a range of social, cultural and political practices. Those who engage in explicit religious practices may or may not deem them to be amongst the most significant practices in their daily lives (though many will). However, it is also true that for those who are not religious, equivalently significant practices are engaged in and, whether consciously or not, people act on the basis of fundamentally held truths (deep convictions, root metaphors). Where not conscious these may, of course, amount to primal urges and

unconscious drives, which are themselves entangled with what is conscious. Such is the focus of psychoanalytic approaches to film and film-reception, and not my focus here, valuable though such approaches can sometimes prove.

Here, my concern is to note that *whatever* people consume and interact with, culturally speaking – whether what is watched, listened to or read may be deemed ‘canonical’ or not – then it is a potential locus of meaning-making in so far as it draws out from the reader, viewer or listener aspects of what they ‘live by’. The concern of canon-commentators such as Scruton and literary critic Harold Bloom (Bloom, 1994) or the debates about what a popular music canon may comprise (Shuker, 2012) match deliberations about what is in ‘the film canon’. But no more than any other canon – except explicitly religious canons of scripture – is the film canon’s contents determined by religious usefulness or theological (or philosophical) profundity. Aesthetic and film-historical value and significance will play a greater role. And yet those of us contributing to the field of religion/theology and film scrutinize the content and impact of a wide range of films many of which are unlikely to feature in any version of ‘the’ film canon. We are exploring their content and impact on other grounds than filmic criteria alone. Canonical status of any kind is largely irrelevant. Let us face facts here: most of us watch (and read and listen to) rubbish as well as attending to quality products (art). That is how human life happens, and has always happened, even if engagement has occurred with different media at different times throughout history (murals, folk songs and street theatre in the middle ages, radio, video games, streamed music and films now). It is theologically important to ask the question of how ‘rubbish’ works as well as the arts in carrying and contributing to the deepest forms of meaning-making that people engage in.

### **Three Theological Theses about Film-Watching**

What, then, in the middle of all of this, happens to ‘theology’ as a concept? (I shall need to leave the question of what happens to theology as a discipline for some other time). I offer my reflections in the form of three theses.

#### ***Thesis 1: ‘Everybody has a script’***

The formulation is from the American biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann (Bruggemann, 2007: 191-2), though I could easily have gone back to insights from the German-American theologian Paul Tillich, writing over fifty years ago, whose desire to clarify that all people have an Ultimate Concern which discloses itself somehow has proved influential on modern theology and beyond (Tillich, 1951, 1956 and 1957). Whilst both Christian Protestants, Bruggemann and Tillich come from different theological backgrounds, and the fifty years between them highlights significant differences in their approaches. Despite the sophistication and richness of his arguments as a whole, Tillich’s ‘Ultimate Concern’ is arguably too close to realist theism to be helpful in any unqualified sense now. In other words, what drives people may not be anything to do with ‘God’. Tillich was certainly not saying that everyone is on a (positive) spiritual quest. He was highlighting the fact that whether or not people are hostile or indifferent to theism, this does not mean that their lives are not profoundly shaped by some basic understanding or controlling drive, narrative or set of commitments. With respect to divergent or competing theisms, his approach offered a (Platonic, ontological) basis on which the different theisms could begin a conversation.

Bruggemann's concern, by contrast, is the script which goes unexamined, the set of values by which people live unless they discover it, highlight it, and engage critically with it. (Like members of the Frankfurt School, Tillich had admittedly seen the dangers of such hidden scripts too, but he could be more positive, and was arguably working in a context of more widespread explicit theism in the USA in the 1950s than Bruggemann can now.) To cite Bruggemann's concern directly: 'The dominant script of both selves and communities in our society, for both liberals and conservatives, is the script of therapeutic, technological, consumer militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life' (Bruggemann, 2007: 192-3). Whether or not Bruggemann is right in specific terms, his point is clear: there are deep assumptions in any culture which shape people's lives and which are important to disclose.

The challenge, then, is to clarify in what contexts and by what means citizens may be enabled to discover, disclose and explore the scripts by which they live.

***Thesis 2: Such 'scripts' are people's 'theologies'***

It is, of course, in a clear, technical sense inaccurate to call all scripts 'theological' if there is no explicit reference to God or gods. In formal terms, however, the debate is the same as the sociologists are engaged in when they distinguish substantive from functional (or phenomenological) definitions of religion (Hunt, 2005). The former are the ones that refer to belief in a transcendent being, the latter describe practices which 'function as' religion. Again, my purpose is not to argue that cinema-going, film-watching or film-fandom *are* religions, or are even *religious*. The issue is about the *significance* of what occurs in the interaction between viewers, readers and listeners and the objects of their participation. Clearly, the content of what people consume or interact with (whether quality art of canonical status or kitsch) will have some bearing on what is concluded by or confirmed in the 'receiver'. But neither producer nor

product controls that reception, even if the receiver cannot, with full legitimacy, simply make of a work of art/cultural product ‘whatever she wants.’

‘Theologies’ in the sense in which I am using the term here, then, are the collections of deep convictions by which people live their lives – whether scrutinized or not. They will be formed by socio-economic, cultural and political factors, as well as shaped by conscious choices. They will relate to patterns of identity-formation, and affiliations to kinship, friendship and interest groups. To repeat: my point is not that audiences really do control meanings – be they discovered or constructed – in their interactions with cultural products. It is, rather, that in the everyday practices of cultural consumption, what receivers do with whatever they consume holds sway over the content and original intention of the product itself.

These ‘collections of deep convictions’ function *theologically* in so far as they are the ground on which and out of which people act and relate to others. They are ‘gods’, whether or not people believe in God.

### ***Thesis 3: Critical Reflection on Such Theological Formation is Under-Developed***

Given that most of us do watch (and read and listen to) rubbish as well as attending to quality products (art), what is to be done if there is insufficient attention to the theological significance (i.e. downright importance) of what occurs in the interaction between the receiver and the product (be that film, book, play, sporting event, work of art, piece of music)? Where is reflection on this process, and the products being interpreted, being done and to be done? Are my questions simply the concern of a privileged, wealthy educated Westerner who (despite all that is being said here) would like everyone to ‘get a good education’ so that careful critical reflection on life can be done by more people? Is it even a veiled way of joining the likes of Harold Bloom and Roger Scruton (and, in UK culture, Matthew Arnold before them) in

wishing and hoping that we did not watch or read rubbish at all, but spent our time on better things (Arnold, 2006)?

It could, of course, be argued that far from being ‘under-developed’, critical reflection on our ‘theologies’ is going on all the time. Critics are having their say, viewers are expressing their opinions, and the internet has accelerated the scale on which, and expanded the ways in which, such interactions occur. This is true up to a point. But as anyone who has spent (wasted?) time looking at the ‘Comments’ sections on blogs or web-pages knows, in the midst of considered commentary and reflection there are also plenty of – to be charitable – less well thought-out opinions aired, frequently vehemently so. Opinions expressed are not necessarily well-informed opinions.

So in ‘secular’ times and contexts, when explicit adherence to religious groupings may be declining, and where it is problematic, dangerous, and yet essential to recognise where absolutes are being assumed and asserted, where and how – beyond the conflicts between terrorists and cartoonists – is such vital *theological* discussion to occur?

In this third thesis I have called the theological significance of what occurs as people consume cultural products ‘theological formation’. This is a term used in the training of religious professionals. This is because the process of formation is broader than the acquisition of cognitive academic knowledge. I am broadening the term out still further, acknowledging that to attend to a film and what it does to a person is not the same as being trained for a profession or vocation. The *process* of formation (identity-formation, discovery or exploration of beliefs and values, examination of cognitive and affective responses to cultural artefacts and media) is nevertheless occurring. But where is this process reflected upon, and where could it be reflected on?



*Education* may, of course, be the answer. Films are used in religious and theological education not simply as a form of media education but because it is recognised how they are already *actually functioning* in society (and many papers in this conference recognise this). Whether the theological significance of film (in its narrower sense, or with the broader definition I am using in this paper) is being addressed in media and cultural studies is quite a different matter. It needs to be.

Beyond such formal educational settings are the *more informal contexts* of film and book groups. I cannot, I must admit, speak in any detail from recent experience about what film clubs do. It is years since I belonged to one. I would, though, doubt that film clubs very often undertake the kind of theological (values-related) discussion I am referring to here. Film clubs are populated by ‘film buffs’ (I guess we might even call them ‘geeks’ now) who may be much more interested in directorial intention and formalist approaches to film than the receiver-focussed angle I am coming from here. Informal theological discussion of film is thus likely to be even more informal still than a film club context would permit. (But I would welcome challenge and correction on this point!)

And what of *faith communities* in all of this? To cite one example only: from a lifetime’s involvement with Christian churches and over thirty years’ worth of engaging in church-life with both film and theology I can report that the record is mixed. There are (still) suspicions in some parts of church life about cinema as a medium. The ‘Christian guides’ (handbooks) that exist which sift the available stock of films, filtering them down into a ‘canon’ acceptable for ‘family viewing’, indicate the nature and scale of this reserve. Even where films of all kinds are openly discussed (and even shown in church settings and then discussed afterwards) the conversation is often heavily controlled or at least steered. This is perhaps understandable. As religious communities, churches have a responsibility to ‘teach the faith.’ That which does not cohere with, and may even be openly hostile to, Christian faith has to be identified as such. In

many ways, the ‘steering’ process, and the proscribing of some films are simply expressions of that educational, formational process.

And yet, as any good educator knows, you cannot ‘teach the faith’ (or even explore the faith) in any existentially compelling way without enabling people to discover the values and beliefs they *already* hold, whatever they are and wherever they have come from. A religious faith may not (indeed is very unlikely) wholly to diverge from the general cultural waters in which all citizens swim. Religions and cultures interweave constantly. Religions are themselves cultures, and societies as a whole contain multiple cultures which together create a culture larger than the religions which operate within them. But sometimes religions will be critical of the ‘scripts’ that citizens enact by virtue of being citizens within a given society. That was Bruggemann’s point (believing that Christianity should offer the change to US citizens to live within a different script than the one they are likely to inherit from the general culture in which they swim). Discussions about films (and books, and plays, and sports) thus invite critical reflection on scripts. And because scripts function as *theologies*, their disclosure and examination is vital.

Resistance to calling such deep convictions ‘theologies’ would, of course, be understandable. Secular atheists will not want to be called any kind of theist. My point, though, in using the term ‘theologies’ is to accentuate the depth, the passion, the level of commitment that all human beings have to some convictions or principles, whether or not these are carefully worked through. They may be held on to with a fervour which, whilst not constituting religious practice, nevertheless deeply shapes the proponents. Whatever such principles comprise (‘families precede friendships’, ‘religious affiliation overrides ethnicity’, ‘ethnicity comes first’, ‘all people are equal’, ‘forgiveness does not come cheap’, ‘humans are more important than other living beings’, ‘all living things are equal’), they may not be apparent until

challenged. When disclosed they may conflict with the convictions of others. But public exposure of them and sensitive scrutiny of them is vital.

### **Conclusion: Film-watching as Significant Social Practice (Revisited)**

This paper, then, has not been specifically about religion and film at all. But this discussion is, I suggest, important *for* religion/theology and film debates because it locates film-watching within the broader framework of social practices which make up media consumption and engagement with the arts. It is essential that religion and film scholars, interpreters of film and so-called ordinary film-goers (and TV-watchers, and sports and music fans) attend to the points made here. Without this happening, absolutes become dangerous by their being hidden and unexamined, rather than inevitably significant and yet always in need of public scrutiny.

‘Theologies’ are, I am suggesting, alive and well in the public domain whether or not people declare belief in God or gods. To fail to recognise this and to fail to disclose one’s own ‘theology’ (set of life-steering principles and convictions) for the sake of recognition and critical examination is not only to lead an unexamined life, but to imply that it is acceptable to leave society’s deepest (and potentially diverse and competing) convictions ill-explored. We may not any longer be able to assume with the same ease as Tillich any unifying Ultimate Concern towards which we might aspire. But to leave multiple poorly-identified ultimate concerns unexamined will not be healthy. The scale of factual, descriptive pluralism is even greater than Tillich might have recognised. But whilst those of us who remain realist theists know how hard it is to speak of God, and yet are also content to acknowledge the *fact* of pluralism, this does not make us ideological pluralists of a kind that turns pluralism into indifference or absolutists of a kind which will accept no challenge to the convictions we ourselves own up to.

Most people in the world remain explicit theists of a kind, whatever Western secular atheists say, and problematic and challenging though this fact is. That there is no single form of theism is clear. But because absolutes of all kinds inevitably remain intact, and many of those are linked to theisms of all kinds, the interpretative task of working out how people consume culture – whether they be explicitly theistic or not – is a public responsibility, and a moral and political challenge. That is where film-watching fits in, as one of the practices in and through which absolutes, theistic or not, become apparent. It is vital to recognise them and make them public. As a sub-field of, or interdisciplinary field related to, whatever academic discipline we work within, in whatever institutional context, ‘religion and film’ really is that important.

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